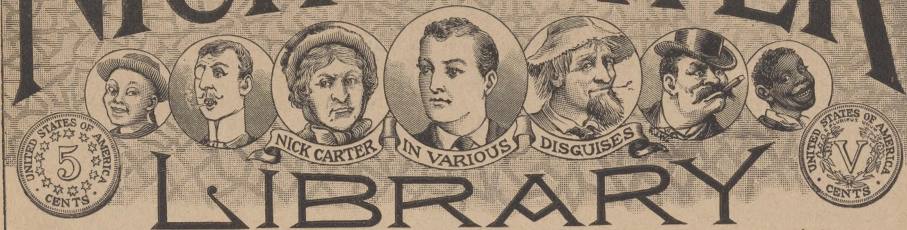


NICK CARTER



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NICK CARTER BEFORE THE MAST; OR, A SEA MYSTERY.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER."



THE TABLECOVER SHOT SUDDENLY UPWARD, WHILE JACK AND TOM EACH COVERED THE DETECTIVE WITH A REVOLVER. "AH," SAID JACK, COOLLY: "MY FRIEND—THE DEVIL!"

NICK CARTER BEFORE THE MAST;

OR,

A Sea Mystery.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

A MUDDLED AFFAIR.

"Water Witch."

Such was the name which glistened in letters of gold upon the stern of a beautiful schooner yacht, lying peacefully at anchor in that part of New York Harbor which is known as Bay Ridge.

She was a beautiful craft. Long, low, with raking masts and graceful lines.

One who knew anything about yachts could tell at a glance that she was fast, although several yachtsmen, looking critically upon her, thought that she had considerable beam for her length, and was a little too full at the bows for speed.

They admitted, however, that she was remarkably clean-cut under the after quarters, and that she rode the water like a duck.

Two men put off from the shore in a small boat and boarded her. One was a pompous-looking, middle-aged man, who wore gold-bowed spectacles, a silk hat, and the general dress of a professional man; the other was a youth.

"She's a beauty, Chick," said the elder of the two; and by that remark we know at once that he was no other than the great detective, Nick Carter.

Chick had the oars, and he pulled directly to the yacht's side.

A sailor leaned over the rail, watching them as they approached.

"Can we come aboard, my man?" asked Nick. "We want to have a look at the Water Witch."

"It's agin' orders, sir, but there ain't no harm, I guess."

"Thanks."

The small boat was made fast and Nick Carter and his young assistant climbed aboard.

They spent an hour in examining the beauty of the yacht's finishings, seemingly manifesting a great deal of enthusiasm over her splendid appointments.

Then they returned to the shore.

That same evening, Nick Carter received a call from Inspector Byrnes.

"Well, Nick," he said, "what did you find?"

"Nothing."

"Eh?"

"Absolutely nothing of a suspicious character."

"You made a thorough examination?"

"As thorough as possible, according to your directions."

"Very good; then there is only one way left."

"What is that?"

"You must go to sea in her."

"Easier said than done, inspector."

"All things are easy to you."

"Thanks. Who owns the yacht?"

"Mr. Gordon Cummings."

"Who is he?"

"A man 'bout thirty-eight years of age, who is supposed to be enormously rich, and who has lately built himself a magnificent house on the old Sylvester place, just beyond Hellgate."

"Ah!"

"You have heard of him?"

"Yes. And now, inspector, this is the first time that I ever consented to make a move in any case without knowing all the particulars beforehand, and I object to the *modus operandi*. You asked me to go and see the yacht, and to look for something suspicious. I did go and found nothing. Before I make another move, I must know the whole story."

"That's right, Nick. I had my own reasons for beginning in this way."

"So I supposed; otherwise I should not have gone there blindfolded."

"Exactly. Well, here is the story."

"I am all attention."

"Four years ago a murder was committed in the residence of one Erastus Thatcher, situated near Montauk Point, on Long Island."

"Yes. I remember it; but the murderer was pursued by an officer of the United States Navy, and shot down by him while attempting to escape arrest. It was afterward proved that he was the murderer, and there the matter ended."

"Precisely."

"Well?"

"Erastus Thatcher had leased his house for five years to a man whose name was Charles Gordon. Gordon's family consisted of himself, wife, his wife's sister (whose name was Lotus Benson), and a young man of about the same age as Gordon, who was introduced as his cousin. His name was Robert Gordon."

"It was the wife of Charles Gordon who was murdered, and it was Robert or 'Bob' Gordon who was killed by the lieutenant in the navy."

"I believe so; yes."

"Lotus Benson went abroad soon afterward, and a year later, Charles Gordon followed her. They were married in Berlin, and soon after that both disappeared entirely, and nobody knew where they went or what became of them."

"Prior to the crime to which we have referred, Charles and Robert Gordon owned a yacht which was called the Sea Scamp. She also disappeared, and as the two were last known to have embarked up here for a voyage to Samoa and the southern seas, it was supposed that she was lost with all on board."

"Well?"

"Two weeks ago a gentleman came to me, who told me a remarkable story, his object being to engage my services, or those of somebody I could recommend, in unraveling a mystery."

"After inquiry, I found that the matter was entirely out of my jurisdiction, and I told him to come to you. He decided to do so, but at his request, I started the thing for him."

"Now I will make two surprising announcements:

"One is that Mrs. Gordon was murdered by her sister, Lotus Benson, and not by Robert Gordon, whom the lieutenant shot; the other is that I believe Charles Gordon and Gordon Cummings to be the same man."

"Indeed! Then where is Lotus, his present wife?" asked Nick.

"That is one of the things you have got to find out."

"Who is the man who wishes to engage me?"

"His name is James Meredith. He is evidently English, and a rich man."

"Humph! Now, inspector, I would like to ask you an impertinent question."

"Ask it."

"Why have you taken all this trouble in the matter?"

The inspector smiled.

"I am coming to that," he said. "Why don't you ask what you are expected to do? I haven't told you yet."

"No; but you will when you get ready. I can wait. Let me hear the balance of the story."

"Meredith says that the Gordons have for several years carried on the business of smuggling on an extensive scale, and have reaped enormous profits. He says further that Robert Gordon was the real head of the concern, and that the woman he was supposed to have murdered, his cousin's wife, is alive to-day."

"In that case there was no murder."

"Exactly."

"How was the supposed crime committed?"

"She was thrown from the top of a high bluff into the sea—"

"And the body was never recovered. I remember now."

"You see there is room for a reasonable doubt of her death."

"Meredith has a home in Wales, on the coast. Some time ago, while staying there, this man Cummings appeared on the scene. He was in the neighborhood a week, and then as suddenly disappeared, and after he had gone, it was found that Mona Meredith, James Meredith's sister, was missing."

"He instituted careful inquiries, and found that she had been seen to leave the shore in a small boat in company with Cummings. The boat went directly to the Waterwitch which was lying off-and-on, and which immediately sailed away."

"I don't exactly see what we have got to do with that."

"Nothing, my dear fellow, except that Meredith wishes to employ you to find out if his sister is aboard that yacht now, and if not, where she is, and he wishes you to obtain information regarding the smuggling operations of Gordon Cummings, that he may lodge it with the proper authorities."

"Personally, I believe this man Meredith to be as deep in the mud as Cummings and others are in the mire, and that is why I have gone about the thing in this manner."

"Meredith will engage you; he will doubtless offer you a handsome reward if you find his sister, and it may be—"

There was a light tap at the door and Chick entered with a card in his hand.

Nick glanced at it, and then, smiling, said:

"Meredith has come. Show him into the reception-room, Chick, and we will have a look at him."

"Now, inspector," continued the detective, when Chick had departed, "while I dress for my caller, you take a look at him through the peep-hole."

The inspector mounted the stool by which the peep-hole was reached, and Nick left the room.

Five minutes later he returned, so changed in form and features that his best friend would not have known him.

"I am ready for the interview now," he said.

"Pump him dry, Nick, if you can, for the fellow in there is not the same man who called upon me at headquarters."

"Not the same man?"

"No. Either there are two James Merediths or one or the other of these men is an impostor. That is a matter for you to find out."

"Do they look alike?"

"Not at all."

"Well, I'll go in, and you can see and hear everything that takes place, if you care to do so."

Nick left the room and the inspector again mounted the observation-stool.

CHAPTER II.

CHICK AS A SHADOW.

"Well, sir, what can I do for you?" asked Nick, as he entered the room where the man who had given his name as James Meredith was awaiting him.

"Are you the detective, Nick Carter?" asked the stranger.

"I am."

"My name is Danforth Prim, and I was secretary to the late Mr. James Meredith."

"Eh? What? Did you say the late James Meredith?"

"I did, sir."

"Will you kindly explain? I understood that Mr. Meredith was alive and well only a short time ago, and that he wished to engage my services. Now you call upon me, send in Mr. Meredith's card, and when I receive you, coolly inform me that he is dead."

"I will apologize for using his card by saying that I came almost entirely upon his business, and that I feared you might not see me if I sent in my own name; one which you had never heard."

"Very good. When did Mr. Meredith die?"

"The day before yesterday. He was killed."

"What! murdered?"

"I can answer yes, and no, to that question, sir."

"Please explain."

"He was thrown from his horse."

"Ah!"

"And I found this fastened beneath the flap of his saddle to-day."

Danforth Prim held an ugly-locking burr, made of steel, which Nick carefully examined.

"You think that somebody put this under his saddle for the purpose of causing an accident, do you?"

"I certainly do."

"Have you any suspicion regarding the possible perpetrator?"

"None sir."

"When did the accident happen?"

"In the morning, about ten o'clock; Mr. Meredith died the same evening at ten."

"He was conscious before his death?"

"Entirely so, and it is to obey instructions from him that I am here."

"Very well; I am listening."

"First, permit me to say that Mr. Meredith was a very rich man, and that he left a will in which everything he possessed is bequeathed to his sister, Mona Meredith, if she will comply with certain conditions. He also had a balance of eight thousand dollars in the bank, for which he instructed me to draw his check; he managed to sign

it, only two hours before he died, and I was told to draw the money and to use it for the purpose of paying you for your services in finding his sister Mona.

"I believe that Inspector Byrnes was to engage you for him, and that through him you are doubtless already aware of the particulars of the case."

"On the contrary, I know next to nothing."

"And I am totally unable to enlighten you."

"But I thought you were here in accordance with his instructions."

"So I am."

"Did he not tell you what to say to me?"

"No; he gave me a key to a little cabinet which stands in one corner of his room, telling me that I would find a document there which would give you the entire history and simplify matters very much."

"Well?"

"To-day, when I went to the cabinet to get the document, I found that some person had been there before me."

"Ah!"

"The cabinet was broken open, and it was empty."

"Indeed. Do you suspect anybody of the theft?"

"I am totally in the dark. The cabinet was in the room where he had been laid out. Last evening about nine o'clock, I noticed that it was intact, because for a moment I paused before it and thought seriously of removing the document then. To-day when I went for it, the thief had been there before me."

"Then the paper was stolen sometime during last night?"

"Yes; but there is a strange fact connected with the theft. I remained in the room all night with the corpse."

"You!"

"Yes. I slept, however, upon the couch. I slept soundly and did not waken until daylight. The room was then in perfect order, so far as I noticed, but I cannot remember that I looked at the cabinet. The door was locked just as I had left it before going to sleep. The windows were down a little at the top. I am a very light sleeper, and have often boasted that no one can enter my room without waking me. However, I heard no sound, if there was one."

"Could the cabinet have been broken open during the day, between the hour that you arose and that when you went for the paper?"

"I should say, no. However, it has been broken open, and the paper is missing."

"Is anything else missing?"

"I think not."

"Have you any idea of the contents of the paper?"

"None whatever."

"Or of any one who would have an interest in stealing it?"

"No, sir."

"Did you ever hear your employer refer to a man named Cummings?"

"Often, sir."

"Tell me about it."

"He believed that Cummings was accountable for his sister's flight, and since his arrival here, he has been many times to Cummings' house to see him."

"Well?"

"He never succeeded. Cummings would not see him, and denied positively any knowledge of Miss Mona."

"What is your opinion of the matter?"

"I think Mr. Meredith was mistaken."

"Have you ever seen Cummings?"

"Twice."

"Could he, in your opinion, have had any reason for stealing the papers?"

"I cannot say, sir; but I should think, no more than you have."

"Um! Now let me see if I understand the case. I am to find Miss Mona and tell her that she inherits all of her brother's wealth if she complies with certain conditions. What are the conditions?"

"They are in this envelope. You may look them over at your leisure."

"Thanks. To continue. Mr. Meredith believed that Cummings was aware of his sister's whereabouts; but you do not."

"That is rather emphatic; still, it is my opinion."

"You are to pay me \$8,000 if I find her, and any reasonable demand for time and expense if I do not."

"Precisely."

"Is that all?"

"That is all."

"Have you her picture?"

"Only a pencil sketch which Mr. Meredith made from memory. He pronounced it a very good likeness."

"Thanks. Your instructions went no further than you have stated?"

"No, sir. We talked of other matters while he lived, believing you would learn everything that he wished you to know from the document, since stolen."

"Who are executors under the will?"

"I am sole executor."

"Indeed; then you become my employer, and I am to report to you when I have finished."

"Yes; and during your employment."

"No, sir; pardon me, but I will not see you again until I have found Mona Meredith or abandoned the case. I never report progress to my clients."

"Very good. Here is my address, and a note sent to me at any time, making an appointment for the following day, will serve your purpose and mine."

"One more question, please. Do you expect me to make any effort in connection with this steel burr and the cause of James Meredith's accident?"

"None at present. I believe that Mr. Meredith would prefer that you should find his sister. I will report the other affair to Inspector Byrnes, and so put that matter in charge of the regular authorities. I have brought you \$1,000 for expenses."

"Thanks. I think I will begin by following Mr. Meredith's suspicions, and looking up the man Cummings."

Prim shrugged his shoulders.

"As you please," he said. "I am only an agent in this matter, acting for the dead. My business is to carry out Mr. Meredith's instructions, and whether you find Mona in charge of Cummings or another is a matter of total indifference to me, personally. I never saw her, and naturally feel no interest beyond carrying out my late employer's wishes. I believe our business is arranged, and I will take my departure."

Nick arose and placed his hands upon the table.

Beneath the cover was a little button which he pressed, unobserved by his caller.

It communicated a signal to Chick, and sent him flying out of the other house into the next street and brought him around to a position where he could see Danforth Prim as he left the house after his interview with Nick.

The detective purposely detained him long enough to give Chick a chance, and then bade him good-night.

"Well, inspector, what do you think of him?" asked Nick, as soon as he rejoined the chief.

"I think he's a fraud."

"So do I."

"He should be shadowed."

"He is."

"Eh?"

"Chick is on his track."

"Can he do it?"

"There isn't a better shadow in New York than Chick."

"Barring Nick Carter."

"Barring nobody."

"What will be your first move?"

"I shall wait for Chick. I did not take much stock in the burr story, did you?"

"No. I will have it investigated. You had better stick to the other, for I begin to see quite a case ahead of you."

"So do I. There is a deep plot here, somewhere, in which Prim is interested, and if Cummings is a villain, Prim is his chief knave."

"Sure!"

Ten minutes later Nick was alone.

But he did not remain inactive.

A sudden idea came to him and he acted upon it at once.

When he issued from the house a half-hour afterward, he was in the costume of a sailor, and he took his way directly to the battery, where he hired a small boat and rowed out in the bay.

CHAPTER III.

A TRADE WITH DAVY JONES.

Nick started to row to the Water Witch, with no particular object other than to look around and pick up information while awaiting Chick's report.

He reached it after a long row, and was debating whether it would be policy to go aboard of her in the darkness, when the splash of oars attracted his attention.

He listened, making no sound himself, and presently became convinced that the boat was heading directly for the Water Witch.

A few careful strokes sent him noiselessly upon the opposite side of the schooner, and from there he heard the low murmur of voices which told him that somebody was boarding the yacht.

He knew by the sound that one person had left the small boat, which immediately put out again for the shore.

The action of the tide carried his own boat close under the schooner's bowsprit, and in order to hold it there he seized the chains.

The night was very dark, but he at once became conscious that there was a human being near him.

Somebody besides himself was clinging to the chain, and Nick was just wondering how he could discover who it was, and force the man to remain silent, when he heard a distinct whisper.

"Ef ye move 'r make a sound, I'll bore ye afore ye can make another," said the whisper.

Even in the darkness, Nick's face expanded into a broad smile.

He recognized the voice instantly.

The person who had whispered was Chick.

The fact of his presence there revealed a great deal, and

only made Nick the more anxious to hear all that his *protege* had to tell him.

"Hello, Chick!" he whispered back.

"By the hokey!" muttered the boy, recognizing Nick's voice.

"Take hold of the boat, Chick, and let me tow you out of ear-shot of the yacht," continued the detective.

Chick complied, and then the detective silently rowed away from the schooner.

As soon as they were far enough away so that there was no danger that the people aboard of the yacht could hear them, Nick assisted his *protege* into the boat.

"Now tell your story," he said. "Prim is, of course, the man who just boarded the yacht, else you would not be here."

"Right," said Chick, "but even you would not know him."

"Why not?"

"Well, sir, I don't believe even you could beat that fellow in the make-up business, or do it any quicker either. He fooled me entirely, and only for an accident, I would have been utterly left."

"Tell me about it."

"When he left your house, he headed straight for the west side, boarded an elevated train, and rode to Fifty-ninth street, and I supposed he was bound for Washington Heights.

"Not he. At Fifty-ninth street he got off and took the Ninth avenue train to South Ferry, and in the ferry-house he disappeared for a few moments.

"I was watching for him to come out, and let two or three men pass me with no idea that he was one of them, but I began to get uneasy, for he remained inside a long time.

"When the boat came, and the gangway door was opened, he hadn't come out, but I stood there as long as I dared."

"Then I made up my mind that he had passed me somehow, and I was mad.

"I had to think quick, too, for both the Atlantic avenue and the Hamilton avenue boats were in their slips, ready to start.

"I jumped for the Hamilton avenue boat and caught it, and then began to look for my man.

"I made up my mind that he was disguised, but I remembered a little fact that I thought would help me find him, and it did.

"In crossing the street on his way to the elevated, after leaving your house, he dodged in front of a big beer-wagon, and the horses splashed him with mud.

"A big chunk of soft mud took him in the right ear, plastering it pretty full. He wiped it off as best he could, but naturally left some there, and I noticed it when we were in the train, so when I went on to the boat, I began a careful examination of every right ear there.

"Say, I found that ear, but I would have sworn that it was on another man. It's a pretty ear, too; smaller than most men wear, but the fellow that had the ear I was looking for wasn't a bit like Prim; no more than I am.

"You know Prim had English mutton-chop whiskers trimmed close; well, the fellow with the ear wore nothing but a long blonde mustache. Prim's hair was reddish brown; his was flaxen. Prim had a way of moving along that reminded you of a cat; he walked as though he owned one half of the earth, and had a mortgage on the other half.

"I turned the thing over in my mind and concluded that I'd follow the ear.

"It came down here; it got into a boat that seemed to be waiting, and the man who was in the boat rowed the ear out toward the Water Witch.

"I made up my mind where they were bound, took off my outside clothes, and went in swimming. We both caught hold of the chain at the same moment, and you know the rest."

"Well done, my boy," said Nick. "Did you hear any conversation between Prim and the man who rowed him out?"

"Just one sentence."

"What was that?"

"Just as the ear was boarding the yacht he said:

"Now hurry! Wait till he comes, and then be lively!"

"Very good. Take these oars, Chick, and row me to the spot where the boat was waiting."

Three minutes later they darted behind a pier and soon ran ashore.

A boat was moored there and Chick nearly collided with it.

"Avast, there!" growled the gruff voice of a man.

"D'y'e think I wanter git all stove up, ye lubbers?"

"Hello!" said Nick; "who are you?"

"That's my biz, an' none o' yourn," was the response.

"No offense, mate," said Nick, genially. "I was jest goin' ter take a drink, and thought o' treatin', that's all. Here's hopin'!"

"Say mate," growled the unknown, "I'll forgive ye fur runnin' me down if ye'll pass the grog."

"Sure!" and Nick passed over the bottle. "I say, wot are ye stranded here for at this time 'o night, eh?"

"Obeyin' horders."

"Oh. Say; dy'e wanter see suthin' purty?"

"Yes, wot is it?"

Nick landed in the stranger's boat with one leap.

"Strike a match an' I'll show ye," he said.

The man fumbled in his pocket for a match, but much to his astonishment, he found himself seized in an iron grasp, and before he had a chance to resist he was securely handcuffed.

Then Nick placed the flat of his knife blade against the sailor's cheek.

It was cold and suggestive.

"If you try to get away or make a sound," he said. "I'll cut you wide open! D'y'e understand?"

"I ain't a blarsted fule!"

"I thought not. Now listen. I've got a hundred-dollar bill in one hand, and a knife in the other. If you do as I tell you, you'll get the cash; if you don't, you'll get the knife; see?"

"Go on."

"Who are you waiting for?"

"The cap'n."

"Who did you just take out to the yacht?"

"The cap'n."

"Be careful."

"I am. We've got two cap'n's now."

"Oh. Which captain have you taken out already?"

"Cap'n Tom."

"What's the other captain's name?"

"Captain Jack."

"Which one is the real captain?"

"No difference when they're both here."

"All right. I'll find out all about that later. How soon do you expect Captain Jack to arrive?"

"He's due now."

"What are you going to do when he comes?"

"Take him aboard the schooner."

"And then?"

"Dunno."

"Set sail?"

"Mayhap; dunno."

"Chick, is there a shed or a boat-house near here?" asked Nick, turning to the boy.

"Yes; about two rods up the shore."

"All right. Now my friend, tell me your name."

"Davy Jones."

"Eh? That's a gruesome name for a sailor, but it will do. Now, Davy, come with me."

"Where away?"

"To the boat-house. I want to talk with you in private. Chick, if Captain Jack comes while we are gone, tell him that Davy will be back presently. Come, Davy, and don't try any funny business, for it won't work with me."

Nick found the boat-house without any difficulty, and taking Davy inside with him, shut the door.

Then, after fixing anklets upon his prisoner, he opened the slide of his dark lantern.

"Here's that hundred-dollar bill, Davy," he said. "Take a good look at it, for if you are wise in your generation, it will soon be yours."

"I am going to become Davy Jones, and you will degenerate into William Brown until further notice. While I am working, I want you to talk, for we haven't any time to lose."

"What d'y'e want me to say?"

"I want you to tell me everything you know about the Water Witch, her two captains, the crew, any people that ever visit her, when and where she sails, and in short, post me so that when I go aboard of her in your place, I'll know enough to carry out the part to perfection. Post me thoroughly, and that bill is yours, and another one just like it when I return. If you put up a job on me, you will get this bill just the same, but will be introduced to the hangman when I come back."

Nick saw the man start and shudder, and knew instantly that he had touched the right chord.

"I know most things, Davy," he added, pleasantly, "and I know about that little affair of yours, so be careful what you say."

"Fur God's sake, who air ye!" ejaculated the sailor.

"Never mind that now. Talk."

Nick began to work and the sailor began to talk. He was thoroughly frightened, and the detective had no fear of being deceived.

At the expiration of twenty minutes Nick had so altered his appearance that he had become the counterpart of Davy Jones.

The clothes he wore were enough like the sailor's so that he did not have to change with him.

When the work was finished, he cut Davy's beard off with his pocket scissors, trimmed his hair, and otherwise altered his appearance.

"There, my friend," he said, "you are now William Brown; a fact that I don't want you to forget. I will leave you right where you are for the present, and the lad you saw with me will come and set you free. Go with the lad, stay where he tells you to stay, and do just as he says until I return, and you shall have the rest of the money."

If you don't, you know what I'll do." Nick hurried back to the boat where Chick was waiting.

Even Chick was startled at first, believing that the sailor had returned, and that something had happened to his beloved master.

In a few hurried words Nick told him just what to do and then sent him away.

He had barely gone, when the expected Captain Jack arrived.

CHAPTER IV.

HIS SATANIC MAJESTY.

The darkness was so great that Nick could not distinctly see the face of Captain Jack, but he felt that it must be the man Cummings who was known to be the owner of the Water Witch.

The captain did not speak.

He simply stepped into the boat and took his seat with the air of one who knows that what he requires will be done expeditiously without the necessity for words.

Davy Jones had been a good instructor, and Nick knew exactly what to do. Accordingly he pushed the boat off, and then rowed swiftly toward the yacht.

His visit aboard the Water Witch had proved profitable, for he had examined everything so thoroughly then that there was no chance of his blundering in the work he had undertaken.

The yacht was reached, and Captain Jack climbed aboard and immediately went into the cabin, while Nick—or Davy, as we will sometimes call him now—mingled with the men.

He was thoroughly installed as one of the crew of the Water Witch now; he was a sailor before the mast.

Nor was he long left in idleness.

Fifteen minutes after the last arrival, the mate walked forward among the men and issued quiet orders for getting under weigh at once.

The cable was slipped through the chock, and fastened to a buoy, probably to avoid the noise made by hoisting the anchor.

Then the mainsail and foresail were hoisted.

There was no creaking of blocks; there was, in fact, no noise whatever.

Everything about the yacht seemed to be in perfect order.

Every man knew his place, and took it.

There was a light but steady breeze blowing, and the jib and two gaff-topsails were set.

In five minutes the Water Witch was speeding toward the Narrows like a bird.

Neither of the captains came on deck, and Nick had not a doubt but that they were discussing many things which would prove interesting to him.

He had decided upon his move in becoming one of the crew of the Water Witch, on the spur of the moment, chiefly because the man Prim had undoubtedly embarked in her.

One of the things which Chick was expected to do, was to drop a note to the address that Prim had given, and solicit an immediate interview.

Prim, being at sea in the Water Witch, could not grant it, and the fact might prove an additional link in the chain of circumstances which Nick began to foresee that he would forge.

The crew of the yacht numbered several more than she seemed to require, and they were a strange set of men, too.

Most of them wore an air of morose sullenness which impressed Nick at once.

They seemed to distrust each other, to be constantly upon their guard, as if in fear of treachery from some unexpected quarter.

That they all hated and feared their two captains, Nick knew from the story told him by Davy Jones, and he suspected that every man there was held in subjection by the exercise of threats.

When the yacht was well under weigh, the men disappeared one by one until only the few whose watch it was remained on deck.

Nick easily avoided them, and in the darkness managed to creep back toward the cabin, unseen.

The Water Witch carried no lights whatever, trusting to the sagacity of her watchman in the chains, and to luck, to avoid collisions and accidents.

The detective was anxious to see what was passing in the cabin, as well as to hear any conversation between the two captains, one of whom, he had no doubt, was Cummings.

But it soon became evident that the officers of the yacht had foreseen and prepared for just such a circumstance.

There was not a crack through which he could peer, nor a crevice through which a sound could penetrate.

He realized at once that he was only wasting time in lingering near the cabin, so he went cautiously forward again to the forecabin.

Disliking to descend to his bunk as yet, he stretched himself upon the deck near the hatchway to think.

Ere five minutes had passed, he was conscious that somebody was near him, and looking up, he plainly saw the head and shoulders of a person protruding from the hatchway.

What startled him more than the mere circumstance itself was that the head and shoulders belonged to a female.

She seemed in that dim light (or rather in the darkness, for he could see her only because he was looking upward from his position on the deck) to be a veritable hag.

Davy Jones had told him nothing of any such person, either having purposely neglected to do so, or having forgotten about it.

The woman stood silent for several minutes. Then she glided out upon the deck, nearly stepping upon Nick in the act, and paused where he could have reached out his hand and touched her with ease.

Once or twice he heard her chuckle, as though well pleased with something.

Presently, she darted aft and went swiftly toward the cabin.

In an instant Nick's shoes were removed, and he was after her, gliding over the deck as silently and as rapidly as she.

Straight to the man at the wheel she made her way, and then Nick heard a strange conversation.

"Who steers?" she said, when she reached the helmsman.

"Bill Wright, Mother Witch."

"'Tis well. The two captains are aboard?"

"Ay—ay!"

"Good. I have just come from the Sea Scamp. She is eastward bound and heavy laden with precious goods. You will meet with her in five days."

"Ay—ay, mother. Will the voyage be successful?"

"Are they not always so, fool?"

"Ay—ay—always."

"I bring success to those who trust me; failure only to those who defy me. Beware, Bill Wright, lest you do not remain true."

"No fear of me, Mother Witch. Who commands the Sea Scamp on this voyage?"

"Captain Tom."

"Ay—but Cap'n Tom is here. He came aboard from the shore to-night, brought out by Davy Jones."

"Fool! Fool! Is he not always here and there and everywhere? Is he not my son, and am I not a witch? Bah!"

"Pardon me, mother, I—"

"You are a fool, Bill Wright. You saw Captain Tom come aboard to-night. Later, you saw Captain Jack. Captain Tom remained until his brother came, and then he dove into the sea. Now, he is a thousand miles away, aboard the Sea Scamp, in her cabin, sleeping. I have just been with Captain Jack; now I am going to Captain Tom. To-morrow night, at this hour, I will be here again. Whose trick will it be then, Bill Wright?"

"To-morrow night? Davy Jones!"

"The grumbler; good. Good-night, Bill Wright. Ho, for the Sea Scamp."

In the darkness, Nick could distinguish her form as she went to the rail.

There she paused for an instant; then, with a wild call, like the cry of a loon, she leaped upward and outward.

The next instant there was a heavy splash in the water, and the yacht fled onward, while Mother Witch fell a prey to darkness and distance.

Nick rubbed his eyes and looked again.

The hag was gone.

Bill Wright remained at the wheel as silent and as motionless as ever.

"Humph!" thought Nick. "So Captain Tom is a thousand miles away, eh? Sailors may swallow that yarn, but it don't quite go down with Nick Carter. If she's a mother-witch, I'll be Old Nick, and out with her."

"That was very real, though, and nine men out of ten would swear that she jumped overboard. I do not believe it!"

"I'll just try one of my pet tricks. I've two good hours of darkness yet."

The superstition of sailors was well known to Nick Carter.

In dressing to go out that night, after his interview with Prim, he had provided himself with several articles which he thought he might need.

Among the possessions stowed away about him was a tight fitting suit of red, with horns and tail.

Nick glided around behind the poop-deck and began the change.

It did not take him long to lay aside the disguise of Davy Jones, and to assume the other.

Then he resembled a veritable imp, particularly when he had rubbed the business end of a sulphur match well over his face and hands.

He drew several lines upon his forehead, made a circle around each eye, and then he stepped out silently and touched Bill Wright on his shoulder.

Bill started as if stung by a bee, and then looked up to behold a veritable imp of Satan beside him.

He did not cry out, but he released the wheel and sank upon his knees with clasped hands, and groaned.

"Fear not, Bill Wright, for thou art in no danger. Did my daughter speak with thee to-night?"

"Yer darter?"

"Yes; the mother witch."

"Ay—ay, yer majesty, she war here. Please, sur, are you the devil?"

"No, William, I am his Satanic Majesty's chief imp. Thou art in favor with us, William. We like thee, and if thou art faithful we will befriend thee. We have another favorite here. He is David Jones. Be thou friendly with David William, and thou wilt be wise."

CHAPTER V.

THE DEVIL'S VISIT.

"I have an order to give thee, William; see that thou obeyest."

"Ay—ay."

"I am going to beckon Mother Witch out of the darkness, but thou must not see us meet. Keep thy eyes upon the compass until I bid thee raise them. Remember, William—and beware!"

"Ay—ay, yer majesty," faltered the helmsman.

He was thoroughly terror-stricken, and had no more idea of disobeying than he had of jumping into the water—not so much, perhaps.

Nick stepped lightly to the rail.

He knew where there was a small heaving-line coiled upon the deck, and he quickly made it fast to the rail just above the place where he knew that the cabin window was located.

Then, without hesitation, he lowered himself over the side.

The next moment he hung pendant from the schooner's rail, just above the foaming water.

Before him was the cabin-port, and he had a full and perfect view of the interior.

The position he occupied was rather precarious, for there was nothing upon which he could rest his feet, and if his hands should slip, there was nothing to save him from drowning.

But he forgot his danger, or rather did not think of it at all, in the interest he felt in the scene before him.

The cabin of the Water Witch was most sumptuously furnished, everything about it having been procured with an evident eye to elegance, and with a total disregard of cost.

In the center was a table, and near it a large easy-chair, in which was seated Captain Jack.

It was the first look that Nick had had at his face, and from the description given him he had no difficulty in at once recognizing the man Cummings.

On the far side of the cabin, stretched upon a couch, was a person who had every appearance of being a youth.

His face was smooth and beardless. Brown curly hair clustered about his temples, and his figure was slight and graceful.

Nick was puzzled.

He had no doubt that the one he knew to be Cummings was also Captain Jack—and yet, who was the other?

Was it Tom?

Possibly, and yet it seemed doubtful to Nick that he could have altered himself into the secretary, Prim.

when Nick first swung down before him had been there only a moment when the man on the sofa spoke.

"This is comfort, Tom," he said. "I would rather be here, in the cabin of the Witch, bounding over the ocean, than masquerading in any character I ever tried. Here we can do as we please without fear of discovery in any form, and every man in the crew is our slave."

"Still the life in New York is a pleasant change," returned Tom, languidly.

(The fact that he was called Tom, surprised Nick, because he could have sworn that he was Jack).

"Tell me about your call upon the detective," said the youth upon the sofa after another short pause.

"I went there simply to find out how much Jim had betrayed."

"Well?"

"He had certainly put that fellow Carter upon our track."

"On Cummings' track, you mean."

"Yes—but it amounts to the same thing."

"Not quite. How much had he told him?"

"Very little, I fancy. He won't tell anything more right away."

"No; that's sure. Did the detective swallow the steel burr story?"

"Yes, I think so. Still I would not care much, even if he had not. Our tracks are all too thoroughly covered up for us to fear him."

"They tell me he is very bright."

"Bah! they are all fools. The best of them can be taken in, just as we play upon the superstitions of our crew."

"Perhaps. We cannot take too great care, however. What think you will be his method, now that he is thoroughly set to work to find Mona Meredith?"

"He will spend part of the thousand dollars I gave him, and put the rest in his pocket; then he will write to Mr. Prim and give the case up."

"I think he will shadow Cummings first—if he can."

"Yes—if he can; but you know as well as I that he cannot."

Then they both laughed.

"Well, Tom," said Jack, "I'm going to turn in."

"And I, presently. I must go on deck first, though."

"Don't forget that you are 'Cap'n Jack' to-night."

"Bah! no fear."

"I'll take a look at our guest. I fancy there are weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth in that quarter about this time."

Nick knew that it would not do for him to remain longer where he was, for Tom might leap up and start for the deck at any instant.

Hand over hand he quickly ascended the rope, drew it silently up after him, coiled it, and returned it to its place, and then touched Bill Wright upon his shoulder again.

"Thou hast done well, William," he said, "and there will be a suitable reward for thee in Hades. I have seen my daughter, and I have heard her speak. She will return to-morrow night to speak with thy messmate, David. Beware, William, that thou speakest not my name in her presence, lest she smite thee sorely. For the others, talk as thou wilt. Thy captain, Jack, will come on deck in a moment; I care not to meet with him just now. Bend thy eyes once more upon thy compass for a moment that thou may not be blinded when I leave thee. So. 'Tis well."

Nick glided away toward the spot where he had left his clothes for the part of Davy Jones.

As he turned the corner of the poop-deck, moving swiftly, he came into violent contact with a human being. There was a muffled oath, and then a blinding flash.

The lens of a dark lantern was directed full upon him. But for an instant only.

It was followed by another oath, and a quick movement which denoted that the person behind the light was drawing a weapon.

Nick ducked, and bounded away as the pistol went off. He was in his stockings, and made no noise whatever upon the deck.

A second leap brought him to his clothes.

Seizing them, a few hurried leaps took him to the mainmast, and with a wild spring he seized the boom, drew himself upon it, and went out over the water.

It was a dangerous place in which to change one's clothes, and yet Nick did it, and with surprising swiftness, too.

Then he hurried back to the deck.

The report of the pistol had brought everybody out, that is, everybody except the youth who had been reclining upon the couch in the cabin when Nick looked in.

It was Captain Jack with whom Nick had collided, and it was he who had fired the bullet.

Just as Nick joined the other sailors in the group that had gathered around, Captain Jack ordered that every man should pass in review before him that he might discover who was missing.

All were there.

Nick fancied that he detected a shade of instinctive fear as well as annoyance cross Captain Jack's features.

Who had appeared before him so suddenly and disappeared so mysteriously?

Was it indeed the devil?

Impossible—and yet if it was not the devil, who was it? One of the men had temerity enough to ask him what he shot at.

"The moon, that we might have more light," he replied.

Instantly, as though in answer to his remark, a flash of lightning shot across the heavens, and the men gazed at each other, awe-stricken.

By daylight they were well out in the ocean, with their course laid south-east by east.

They had a beam wind blowing half a gale from the north-east, and steadily growing fresher.

By noon, the topsails were taken in, and at two o'clock reefs were taken in the fore-and-main-sails.

The waves were rolling mountains high, and Captain Jack remained on deck nearly all the time, keeping the yacht under his personal supervision.

Nick was a thorough sailor, and he experienced no difficulty in fulfilling the duties of Davy Jones, nor did any one suspect the fraud.

Whenever Captain Jack came on deck, Nick watched him narrowly, particularly when he returned after a few moments' absence, and the detective speedily became satisfied that the two men in the cabin frequently changed places.

They performed the work so cleverly, however, that even Nick Carter would not have detected it had not he suspected as much from the conversation that he had heard through the cabin window.

They copied each other's voice, and mannerisms to per-

fection, even to little gestures which the average person would not have noticed at all.

There was just one little point of difference which Nick detected, and he watched for it eagerly every time he had reason to believe that a change had taken place. That consisted in the manner of putting the foot down in walking.

It was strange that two people could copy each other so perfectly that the sharp eyes of Nick Carter could not detect the difference, and yet it was so.

There was no difference in their respective gaits, but only in the manner of putting the feet upon the deck.

One, and Nick believed it was Tom, walked just as the majority of others do, touching the heel just an instant before the ball of the foot came down. The other put his foot down flat, or even touched the ball to the deck an infinitesimal fraction of time before the heel.

It gave him that quick, gliding, restless motion that the cat family possesses, just as though the person were ever ready to spring this way or that.

The *Water Witch* was stanch and true, and entirely sea-worthy, otherwise she could not have lived through that north-east gale.

Instead of abating, the wind grew fresher and fiercer, and by night it amounted to a tempest.

Reef after reef had been taken in the sails, until there was barely enough canvas to keep her in headway.

As before, when darkness settled down, the yacht showed no lights.

Evidently Captain Jack was as reckless as he was daring.

CHAPTER VI.

IN CHAINS.—DAVY JONES DISAPPEARS.

The crew were evidently accustomed to their captain's peculiarities, for they never murmured, although every one of them must have known that their lives were in a danger that was magnified tenfold by the absence of lights upon the yacht.

She was rushing along at a frightful rate when suddenly, dead ahead, a bright light loomed out of the darkness.

It appeared for an instant, and then vanished, only to suddenly reappear.

Then, as if to further warn them, a rocket went shooting skyward.

Not a half-dozen boat's-lengths separated the two vessels when the rocket was set off, and Nick knew that they were in imminent peril of colliding with a ship in mid-ocean.

Captain Jack seized his trumpet and leaped amidships.

"Luff!" he cried, "luff for your lives!"

The *Witch* rounded up like a gull, but a huge billow caught her as if she were a feather, and dashed her, with lightning speed, full at the vessel in distress.

For an instant everybody felt that the cruise of the *Water Witch* was ended.

Then there came a sudden jar, slight and scraping, and she glided safely past the danger.

The two vessels had actually touched each other in mid-ocean, but so lightly that no damage was done.

The crew of the yacht could see upon the deck of the other vessel, for several lights gleamed there.

They saw enough to know that there were people hud-

dled together, terrified; to know that she was doing her best to work and to realize that she was doomed.

Then they passed away, swallowed by the darkness, swept by the mighty waves, followed by a hundred cries for help from the souls who had never realized the proximity of another vessel until she had disappeared again.

From that hour, the waves seemed to subside, and the gale became less furious.

Throughout it all, Nick had been at the wheel with two others to assist him, but at midnight the captain changed the trick, and Nick was relieved.

"Now is my time," he thought; "everybody is tired out, and those who are not sleeping are busy."

Once more he assumed his devil dress, after admitting himself to the hold through a bulkhead door from the forecabin.

The door was locked, but that offered little or no impediment to Nick Carter, and once beyond it, he knew that he was practically safe from observation.

His little lantern showed him where to go, and he was surprised at the size of the yacht's hold.

"If ever a vessel was built for a smuggler, this was," he muttered.

But the space was then empty.

She was outward bound, to meet the *Sea Scamp* and relieve her of her rich cargo.

Nick continued to make his way aft.

Three times he was stopped by bulkheads which at first it seemed impossible to pass, but a little search revealed a door through each one, and his own expertness unlocked them.

At last he knew that he was near the cabin.

He had reached a compartment much smaller than the others that he had passed, for the beam of the yacht had been divided in the center by a bulkhead running fore-and-aft.

"The next compartment aft is the cabin," he thought, "but before endeavoring to penetrate there, I must have a look at that starboard compartment."

He flashed his light around him, and was just about to step forward when he heard a slight noise.

Instantly he shut off his light, and not a bit too soon.

There was a sharp click, and a light appeared from an opening in the cabin bulkhead.

Nick shrank back, only half concealed behind a box which had been lashed to the deck.

Discovery seemed certain, but he did not move.

The person who held the light moved forward a step or two, and then paused.

"Something is wrong with me," murmured a low voice.

"Last night I saw a devil, or something very like one, and to-night a glimmer of light flashed in here when I opened the door."

"Bah! the light was a reflection from my own; but who was that devil?"

The voice ceased and the person who had spoken stepped hastily toward the fore-and-aft bulkhead.

There, he touched a spring and a door flew open.

The light he carried shone into the compartment beyond, and Nick from the darkness could see that the little door communicated with a subsidiary cabin, furnished almost as luxuriously as the one occupied by the two captains.

The visitor passed through, leaving the door open, and Nick glided forward and peered in upon the scene.

A man, with an iron ring upon one ankle, attached to which was a chain that was fastened to the hog-frame of the schooner, was seated near a table, reading.

"I am late to-night," said the visitor whom Nick saw was Cummings, or in other words Captain Jack. "We have had a storm."

"Yes, I know."

"Do you wish for anything?"

"Nothing."

"Not even forgiveness, eh?"

"I know I can't get that."

"No, you cannot. There is just one fate before you, and you know what that is. I would have settled it long ago, but Tom would not consent."

"You carry this farce too far. Why don't you?"

"Tut-tut! We never say anything but Tom and Jack to each other. Does it offend you?"

The man shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

"Why don't you make an end of all this?" he asked.

"How?"

"By tossing me overboard—or shooting me. I infinitely prefer it to your society."

"Do you?"

"Yes. Give me a weapon, and I will save you the trouble."

"Will you? I doubt it. However, I will talk with Tom. It may be a good idea. I am going back now, since you want nothing."

Nick hastily left his point of observation, and darted away.

Before him stood the open door by which Captain Jack had entered from the cabin.

A faint glimmer of light shone through, for the door was evidently hidden on the other side by curtains.

The impulse seized Nick, to penetrate into the cabin.

If Captain Jack's double were not there to discover him, he could do it.

The risk had to be taken without time for thought, if at all.

One spring carried him to the door.

The next instant he passed it and peered cautiously through the curtains.

The cabin was empty.

Behind him he heard the click of the closing door, as Captain Jack left his prisoner and returned toward his own cabin.

It was too late to back out.

With a quick motion he parted the curtains and stepped through.

In the center of the cabin was a large round table, covered by some delicate texture of Persian manufacture which drooped to the floor on every side.

With one bound Nick reached it, and concealed himself beneath the cover.

Then, before the approaching captain arrived, he cut little V-shaped slit in three places.

None of them were larger than a silver dime, but with the point of his knife he could raise the acute angle of the slit and obtain quite an extended vision.

Captain Jack entered the cabin and at once went to the neat easy-chair, and seating himself, lighted a cigarette.

A moment later the companion-way door opened, and Jack, peering out, saw another Captain Jack enter there.

The two were made up exactly alike. An Irishman would have said that they could not have told each other apart.

But one was really Jack, and the other one was Tom, and the one whom Nick had seen interviewing the prisoner, was Jack.

"Man overboard," said Tom, coolly, as he entered.

"Who?" asked Jack, lighting his cigarette afresh.

"Davy Jones."

Nick started.

"How did it happen, Tom? Jones was a good man."

"Nobody knows how it happened. I wanted to speak to him and sent Wright to find him. They searched everywhere, and he was missing, so he must have gone overboard in the darkness."

"Perhaps he's hiding."

"I tell you we searched everywhere."

"In the hold?"

"Pah! how could he get there. No, he is drowned."

"What if he is deceiving you, Tom? What if he is that evil whom I saw last night? What if he is spying upon us?"

What if Davy Jones is no other than Nick Carter, they having exchanged personalities as we do? What if I saw me play the witch the other night, and followed it with his devil-act? I have talked with Bill Wright, and he believes that he talked with the devil. He says that he knows it because he saw him leap into the sea just as other Witch does. Where did he go when he leaped to the sea, for he returned again? Did he go to those ports and look in here upon us? Did he see me with almost no disguise upon my face?"

CHAPTER VII.

A STRANGE COMPACT.

Jack still reclined in the easy-chair, and spoke coolly while he asked these startling questions—startling alike to his companion and to Nick, who was lying concealed beneath the cabin-table.

Nick realized that his disguise as Davy Jones was of no further use.

First, he had been missed, and a search had been made to find him—a vain one. Second, having disappeared, suspicion that he was playing double was naturally aroused.

"Well," said Tom, "if all that you say is true, what then?"

"It follows that he is not lost overboard."

"Certainly."

"And therefore that he is hiding somewhere aboard the schooner."

"But where?"

"In one of the compartments of the hold."

"How could he get there?"

"By picking locks."

"Hardly probable."

"Yet eminently possible. I fancied I saw the glimmer of a light when I went into my cabin to-night. It is possible that the light I saw was in his hand, and that he saw and watched me."

"You are afraid, Jack?"

"Afraid! I?"

There followed a quiet little laugh that was full of meaning.

"Did you ever know me to fear anything, Tom?"

"No. And yet, what if your suspicions are correct? What if Nick Carter is aboard the Water Witch?"

"There is only one answer to that question."

"What is that?"

"He must never leave it."

"Ah!"

"We will set our traps for him, and he will get caught. Sooner or later he will endeavor to penetrate to this cabin——"

"What if he is here now?"

"It may be that he is. If so, there is but one place where he could hide."

"True."

"If he is here, he is at this moment underneath that table. If he is there, he will never come out alive."

Tom sprang to his feet.

"Let us look!" he said.

"No; wait. There is no hurry. I do not think he is there, yet he may be. If he is, he cannot escape. If he is not, he will sooner or later get there. Fix the lamp, Tom."

There seemed to be a hidden meaning in Jack's order to fix the lamp, and Nick ran the risk of peering through the hole that he had cut in the cover.

He saw Tom hand the end of a cord to Jack, and then resume his seat.

Jack sat with the cord in his left hand; his right was concealed on the other side of the chair.

"Let us suppose," he said, "that we have the detective for a passenger."

"Yes."

"That he came here by following you in the character of Prince."

"Yes."

"It follows, then, that he knows everything."

"Surely."

"Particularly if he was in the hold when I went in just now, and saw James Meredith in chains."

"Exactly."

"He knows that Gordon Cummings is a fictitious person—that he does not, in fact, exist."

"Or rather that there are two—or three. Have you fixed the lamp, Tom?"

"Yes."

"All right!"

The two words were pronounced sharply and clearly. At the same instant, the table-cover, which concealed Nick from view, shot suddenly upward.

The detective was instantly revealed, for there was nothing left to hide him from view.

There he was upon the cabin-floor, beneath the table, while Jack and Tom, seated quietly in their chairs, each covered him with a revolver.

Instead of fixing the lamp, Tom had affixed a hook into a ring in the center of the table-cover.

When everything was ready the cord was pulled and the table-cover shot into the air.

"Ah," said Jack, coolly; "my friend the devil."

"I am glad that you recognize old friends," retorted Nick.

"Always. There is a saying that 'the devil is dead; have you heard it?'"

"Yes."

"And I; but never with credulity. When the Water Witch is again in port I will believe it."

"You may."

"How long have you been there, Mr. Devil?"

"Since I first came."

"Indeed; and you will remain until you leave, I suppose. You are wise. Do you realize that you have committed suicide?"

"Not yet," answered Nick. "I may be on the point of it, but I am not yet a victim."

"No. Now tell me who you are?"

"I think you know."

"Perhaps. You are Nick Carter?"

"Yes."

"Otherwise known as the Little Giant. You are the man who knows everything; who can do everything; who could have slain Goliath at collar-and-elbow, or have tossed Hercules over your shoulder. You speak every language; know every science; are a master of every art; can run faster; jump higher; dive deeper; swear louder, and eat more than any ordinary ten men. You are the wonder of the age, and the marvel of the modern world. Have I succeeded in enumerating a few of your accomplishments, Mr. Carter?"

"Yes—a few," replied Nick, smiling.

"And now you are under a table—and at the mercy of two—"

"Jack!"

"Yes, Tom. Is he not at the mercy of two, when by his own admission he could master ten?"

"I think I could easily handle both of you," said Nick, dryly.

"I don't doubt it, Mr. Carter—or shall I call you Nick?—but you won't try, will you, Nick?"

"Well, no, not just at this moment."

"Exactly. You are unarmed, I fancy, except for that knife at your side."

"Yes."

"Nick Carter," and the voice changed from the tone of raillery to one of utter sternness, "my better judgment warns me to shoot you now, and have done with this, and yet I will make terms with you."

"I am afraid that will be impossible."

"Perhaps. You shall answer that."

"As you will."

"Do you recognize the fact that you are at our mercy?"

"Yes."

"That though you made an effort to escape now, you would not succeed were you twice as quick and powerful as you are now?"

"Yes."

"If you should make me a promise, would you keep it?"

"I certainly would."

"I have always heard that was one of your eccentricities, so I will believe you."

"Thanks."

"Will you promise me faithfully, and on your honor, as you hope to see New York again, that for twenty-four hours from now you will make no effort to escape, resort to no violence or strategy in order to take advantage of my generosity, and that during that time you will submit to my orders without question?"

"Conditionally, yes."

"What are your conditions?"

"If violence is attempted against me, or strategy, or chicanery of any sort, I will protect myself."

"Certainly."

"What happens at the end of twenty-four hours?"

"You will submit to captivity and be chained as James Meredith is, unless we agree to extend the time."

"Very well; I agree."

"Good. Get up, please, and take a seat," and Jack coolly returned the weapon he held, to his pocket.

"I don't fancy your costume," said Tom, also putting away his revolver, "but perhaps it is the only one you have."

"No, I have another."

"Davy Jones?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. Wait, I will fix you out."

Tom disappeared into a little state-room.

Presently he returned.

"Go in there," he said. "I have laid out a suit for you."

Nick entered the tiny state-room, and his quick eyes took in every detail of the place while he was occupied in making the change in his costume.

There were little bits of bric-a-brac and knickknacks which at first surprised him. Then he began to look interested.

Presently, when he had finished making the change (and was the real Nick Carter, because for once in his life he was without the where-withal to be anything else—there was a peculiar smile of satisfaction upon his face.

Nick Carter in *propria persona* was a remarkably handsome man, and the change was so great from the characters in which the two captains had seen him, that they both evinced their astonishment when he reappeared.

There were bottles of wine upon the table, a box of cigars, bundles of Cuban cigarettes, some salad, and hand crackers.

"Now Nick," said Jack, "this is probably the first time you were ever entertained by the people you were hunting down, that is, when they were fully aware of your intentions, as we are."

"Yes, I believe it is."

"You have no objection to the truce, I suppose?"

"None whatever. The fact is, I was getting a little bit bored, forward among the crew."

"Exactly. While the truce lasts we will enjoy it. When it ends and hostilities are resumed, it will be war to the bitter end. However, we won't discuss that now. Fill up your glass."

"Thanks."

"You know that we are smugglers."

"Yes."

"And that we are both Cummings."

"Yes."

"And that James Meredith is our prisoner instead of being dead."

"Yes."

"And you are satisfied that Mona Meredith is not here."

"Perfectly."

"Would you like to know where she is?"

"Very much."

"Why?"

"Curiosity only. I have no further interest in the matter since I know that Prim and Tom are one and the same."

"You are smart, Nick, to know which of us was Prim."

"Thanks. Will you do me a favor?"

"What is it?"

"Become yourselves, as I am. Do away with disguises for the endurance of the truce."

Without a word they both arose and went toward the state-rooms.

"Fair play, eh?" said Jack, merrily, as he disappeared through the door.

He was gone but a moment, returning with exactly the appearance that he had worn when Nick had peered through the cabin window at them, the first night.

Tom had not yet reappeared.

"You are still deceiving me," said Nick.

"I!" exclaimed Jack.

"Yes."

"Have I not done away with my disguise?"

"No."

"What would you have me do?"

"Become yourself."

"And who, pray, do you think I am?"

"I know that you are a woman! I think that you are Lotus Benson."

Jack's face became as pale as death.

He leaped quickly back, and again drew his weapon.

"Don't forget your promise," said Nick, coolly.

The pallor left Jack's face. The frown of anger gave place to a smile. The weapon was returned to the pocket from whence it had been drawn.

"You should have retained your former costume, Nick Carter, for you must be a devil."

"Why? because I know you to be a woman?"

"No; but because you know me to be Lotus Benson—for I am!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A WONDERFUL REVELATION.

In many respects, the position in which Nick found himself on board the *Water Witch* was the most peculiar in his experience.

Detective work in the narrow confines of a yacht is necessarily greatly restricted, and, caught as he had been, practically unarmed and at the mercy of his enemies, he had no course, except to make the best of the situation.

It was when he went into the state-room to change his costume that he had become convinced that there was a woman aboard the yacht.

Little things which would pass unnoticed by most people, mean a great deal to a detective, and he had seen several trivial things there which a man would not think of including in his list of necessities.

Just as Lotus Benson made the announcement that Nick was correct regarding her identity, the door of Tom's state-room opened.

Turning his face in that direction, Nick beheld, instead of a man, a beautiful woman.

She paused irresolutely upon beholding her companion still in a male costume.

"What does this mean, Jack?" she said. "I took you at your word when the agreement was made to appear in our own characters, and—"

"And it is all right. Nick knows that we are not men. I did not mean that he should know it, but he does. Not only that, but he also knows that I am Lotus Benson."

Then turning again to Nick, she added:

"Are you as wise regarding Tom?"

"No—unless she is Mona Meredith."

"She is."

Nick smiled.

"This becomes interesting," he said. "Will you tell me, Miss Mona, why you came to my house yourself in the character of Prim, the secretary, to put me on your own track?"

"Simply because we knew that Jim had betrayed us, partially. We believed that we could throw you off the scent by setting you to search for Mona."

"Ah. Are you aware that you owe me \$7,000? I believe I was to have eight if I found you, and I have done so."

Mona Meredith laughed heartily.

"You will have to find Danforth Prim in order to get your pay," she said. "Shall I tell you something which will puzzle you still more?"

"Yes—if you can."

"Danforth Prim is at this moment in New York. The body of James Meredith is there; the face was exhibited to those who cared to look into the casket, and the regular funeral services were in no wise neglected."

"Is that all?"

"No. The will will be filed, and reads as I stated."

"But why the story about the steel burr?"

"Because, had you chanced to follow the clew suggested by that, it would never have brought you to us."

"Ah. It might have taken me to Cummings, however, and he would have eventually led me to you."

"On the contrary."

"Why?"

"Cummings is also in New York."

"But he does not exist? You are Cummings, Lotus Benson is Cummings, and—"

"And why may there not be another who is also Cummings?"

"True."

"True indeed. But for the chance of your having sailed with us in the character of Davy Jones, you would have been entirely misled."

"It was not chance."

"What then?"

"I have a *protege*; he followed Mona Meredith when she left my house as Danforth Prim."

"And succeeded?" cried Lotus. "Then it is your fault, Tom."

"No," said Nick, "she would have outwitted him had not some mud splashed in her ear. He followed the ear and it took him to the *Water Witch*. I would like to ask a few questions."

"Ask anything you please," said Lotus.

"First, then, why are you so willing to give me all this information?"

"Because you can never use it against us."

"Indeed; why not?"

"Because"—and she spoke impressively, and her eyes sparkled ominously—"you will never again be situated so that you can."

"Ah; I begin to understand. You have sentenced me."

"We have."

"To what?"

"To either one of two courses."

"Will you name them?"

"Yes. One is that you finish this cruise with us, return to New York, and go about your business as of old, on condition that you swear on your honor never to reveal anything that you know regarding us, and never again to molest us."

"Ah! and the other?"

"The other simply involves the absolute certainty that you will never see New York again."

"That can mean but one thing."

"What is that?"

"That I cease to live."

Lotus shrugged her shoulders.

"Perhaps, though not necessarily," she said, coldly.

"Are you aware that I could spring upon you now, and that in all probability I would prove the victor in the struggle that would follow?" asked Nick.

"No. You are mistaken, for several reasons. One is, that you have given your promise not to do so for twenty-four hours."

"Give me another, for I might be tempted to break that promise if my life were at stake."

"Another is that although we would not move or raise a hand, you would never reach us."

Nick smiled incredulously.

"You do not believe me?" said Lotus.

"No," replied Nick.

"Very well; raise your eyes, and look at the bulkhead over me. Do you see anything?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"It looks like a rifle barrel."

"It is. The muzzle is pointed at your heart; the rifle is loaded; the hammer is raised; a finger is upon the trigger, and an eye is glancing over the sights. At the slightest move of aggression on your part the rifle would be discharged. Do you realize the result?"

"Yes."

"Now look over Tom's head and tell me what you see."

"Another."

"Precisely; and the conditions are the same. Turn to the right."

"Well?"

"You see another, do you not and yonder is still another."

"Humph!" said Nick.

"There are four rifles aimed at your heart by four trusted servants who are also excellent marksmen. Could you escape them all?"

"No; evidently not."

"The rifles will not injure you unless you cause them to be discharged by your own act—or, unless I give the signal for them to fire."

"Thanks," said Nick, coolly, and sinking back into his chair, "on that assurance I will take things easy."

"That is wise. Do you realize that we are masters here, and that you are utterly at our mercy?"

"I begin to."

"Very good. It is as well that you should be warned. Now, if you seek further information, proceed."

"What became of Charles Gordon and his wife?"

"They live, and are both on this yacht."

"Eh?"

Lotus smiled.

"Charles Gordon is known to you by the name of James Meredith," she said.

"Ah!"

"And his wife is yonder."

"What! Mona?"

"Yes. She is his wife instead of his sister. It was he and not his cousin who flung her from the cliff, although it was his cousin who was shot for the supposed murder."

"She was saved, and the very next night he was chloroformed and sent away on a brig, which did not touch land until it reached Cape Town, Africa. She played the part of the husband who had tried to murder her, until we could leave Long Island forever."

"We conceived this idea and we have carried it out perfectly. We do not resemble each other except in figure and in the color of our eyes. Our voices we have trained by long practice, and we can make up so exactly alike that no one can detect the difference."

"Charles Gordon—or Jim, as we always called him, returned. He could not find us, but at last he got upon our track through meeting one of his old sailors on the street."

"Then he made all sorts of overtures, but he made them to me, believing that Mona was dead."

"At length he threatened."

"Then the thought that Mona was still alive came to him, and again he threatened."

"We had him watched, and learned that he was putting officers upon our tracks."

"We determined to outwit him, and we succeeded."

"He is on his way now to a prison where he will be supplied with every comfort, but from which he can never escape unless Mona or I liberate him; so you see what two women can do."

CHAPTER IX.

FACING CERTAIN DEATH.

"There is yet a mystery connected with the affairs at Montauk Point," said Nick. "Why was Bob Gordon shot by the lieutenant?"

"Because, the lieutenant believed him guilty. When Jim threw Mona from the cliff, he was mistaken by the officer for his cousin. Whether it was an accident or a plot of Jim's to get rid of Bob and Mona both, I cannot say."

Nick was assigned to one of the state-rooms, and presently retired.

The following day he spent in the cabin.

Lotus and Mona appeared only in their male attire, and never did they address each other except as Tom and Jack.

Toward evening, when Nick was enjoying his cigar, gazing out upon the ocean through the cabin port, Lotus, in the garb of Captain Jack, came suddenly in from the deck.

"Eighteen of the twenty-four hours of our truce have passed," she said. "Will you continue it, under the same conditions, for twenty-four more?"

"As you please," returned Nick.

"Then let it be so."

That night and the following day wore away without incident, and again the truce was renewed.

On the evening of the fifth day out from New York, Lotus and Mona once more assumed their real characters. The sisters were both beautiful, and yet very different.

As women they were charming, fascinating; in the guise of men they were completely transformed, and Nick often marveled at their courage, and their abilities as sailors.

"This is our last evening together," said Lotus.

"At midnight, or soon after, if all goes well, we will speak the Sea Scamp, which brings us our cargo of contraband goods, and the time has come for you to decide what you will do."

"I am ready."

"Very well; what is your decision?"

"I have the choice of two evils?"

"Yes, if you prefer to call them by that name."

"I must promise never to betray you, or—"

"Or never see New York again."

"I will make the promise on one condition."

"What is that?"

"That you also promise to forsake this career, to continue on your way across the ocean, and never again to return to New York."

"We distinctly refuse."

"Indeed. Then so do I."

"Notwithstanding the consequences?"

"I refuse."

"You are aware that the rifles still menace you?"

"Yes."

"And that I have but to give a signal, and you will be shot?"

"Yes."

"And yet you refuse?"

"Yes."

"Nick Carter, think again before you decide. We will spare you if you will let us. Think again."

"I have thought."

"And you still refuse?"

"Yes."

"Is there no compromise to which you will agree?"

"None."

"Your answer is final?"

"It is."

"Very well. It is now ten o'clock. The truce expires at two—four hours from now. Will you keep its terms until then?"

"Yes. I have promised; that is enough."

"So be it."

All were silent for a long time.

Presently Lotus retired to her state-room, and soon reappeared as Captain Jack.

Then Mona did likewise.

At twelve—midnight—Mona left the cabin, and did not return.

At one, Lotus went out on the deck.

She was gone but a moment, and then returned.

"The Sea Scamp has been sighted," she said, "and is now less than a mile from us. Once more, are you still determined?"

"I have not changed, Miss Benson."

"Listen. You have seen me as a woman. Am I not beautiful?"

"You certainly are."

"In the Caribbean Sea there is an island which is supposed to be uninhabitable. The island has descended to me as an inheritance from my grandfather, who was a pirate, and my father who was a slave-trader. There, everything is beautiful, and life can be made a dream. There I have servants and gold; I have books and works of art; I have everything to make life worth living."

"Then why do you not forsake this life and go there?"

"Ay, why not? Because the island, with all its beauties and attractions, is barren without love."

"Ah."

"Nick Carter, I am a woman; I am beautiful; I am young, for I am now only twenty-seven; my life has not

been free from wrong, but, as a woman, I am stainless. Be my husband; go with me to my island home. We will forget the world, and you shall redeem me from sin."

There were tears in her eyes as she spoke, and her voice trembled with the emotion that she felt.

Nick was moved with pity and endeavored to speak kindly in reply, but the very effort made his voice sound cold and hard.

"There are two reasons why what you propose is impossible," he said.

"Will you state them?"

"One is sufficient. I am already a married man."

"Were you free, would you refuse?"

"I would."

She left her chair and walked to and fro across the cabin twice.

Suddenly she paused before Nick, and speaking steadily, said:

"In a half-hour our truce will be ended."

"Yes."

"And then between us there will be naught but war."

"As you will it."

"You are at my mercy, Nick Carter."

"Perhaps."

"And I will not spare you."

Nick bowed.

"Man can die but once," he said.

"You are a fool!"

"Wisdom is the portion of but few."

"Will you submit to being bound when the truce expires?"

"No."

"Nor just before?"

"No."

"What will you do?"

"Fight! Usher in your crew. Draw them up in a circle surrounding this cabin with me in the center. Arm them all with rifles, and let each man point his weapon at me. Stand among them yourself, and when the clock yonder strikes two, give them the word to fire. If they obey, and I fall, your work will be done. If they fail, and I alone am victorious over them all, the fault will not be yours."

"Nick Carter, you are a wonderful man, and a brave man. Could you hope to succeed?"

"No; but I will make no effort to escape until that hour unless somebody seeks to bind me. Give the word to your rifles now, and let them end it, or else do as I say."

"It shall be done!" she cried, leaping to the companion-way.

"All hands aft!" she cried. "To the cabin, my men!"

They rushed aft in a body. Even Bill Wright left his post at the wheel for the schooner was lying to and needed nothing but a lashed wheel.

She placed them around the cabin, each man armed.

Nick was in the center of the throng menaced by every rifle.

The first stroke of the clock at two was the signal for them to fire, and Nick Carter stood with folded arms awaiting what seemed to be certain death.

Then Captain Jack, *alias* Lotus Benson, withdrew.

CHAPTER X.

QUICK RETRIBUTION.

When Lotus Benson withdrew from the cabin, after leaving Nick in the very center of the crew, each holding a rifle aimed at the detective's heart, she paused for an instant beside the door.

Suddenly, she dropped upon one knee, and, raising her right hand high above her head, remained in that attitude for a full minute, while her lips moved as though she were praying.

Whether it was a prayer or a curse that she uttered—whether she breathed a vow or an execration, no one but herself ever knew.

Presently she leaped to her feet, and gliding forward until she stood amidships, she drew her watch from her pocket.

The stars gave her light enough to see the time.

"Nine minutes of two," she murmured. "Yonder is the Sea Scamp, and between us is a boat awaiting me, if Mona did her errand."

"She shall never know—nobody shall ever know, for to-night Nick Carter dies. To-night the only man I ever loved perishes."

"Eight minutes of two. He does not die alone, for the crew of the Water Witch will perish also. Their bullets will spare him the agony of drowning, and then, they, too, will sink to rise no more."

"Five minutes of two. The time has come, and I will not hesitate."

She bent forward and inserted a yale key in a slot in the deck between the seams.

Withdrawing it, the plank came up like a miniature trap-door, revealing three brass rings arranged in a row. Seizing one of them, she pulled upon it with all her strength.

Presently it gave way, suddenly, in her grasp.

She released it, and seized another ring, and then the third.

Having completed her task, she again closed the little trap and locked it.

Then she straightened up and hurried to the side of the vessel.

There were two boats swung upon davits, and she passed quickly beneath each one.

Suddenly she emerged and ran to the bow.

"The Water Witch is already settling in the water," she murmured. "In ten minutes she will sink with all on board, and now I must hasten."

Outward through the darkness she leaped, plunged headlong into the sea, and disappeared from view.

* * * * *

In the cabin the tableau was still being enacted.

Nick did not move; he stood there with folded arms, awaiting death, for he did not hope to be saved.

The warning rattle of the clock at five minutes before two was like the ringing of the curfew.

Then another minute ticked itself away.

Still another, and the Water Witch seemed to stagger as if in the grasp of a foe.

Bill Wright glanced apprehensively at the mate, and the men's faces blanched.

Again the vessel staggered and shuddered, rolling over a billow with the sloughing, dragging motion so well known to seafaring men.

Nick knew what it meant as well as they.

Two minutes of two.

The Water Witch plunged forward as though to dive beneath the billows forever.

Then she righted as though recovering from a savage blow.

At the same moment a heart-rending shriek came up to them from the hold.

It was the death-cry of James Meredith.

"She's foundering!" shouted Bill Wright.

It was enough.

The men threw down their rifles.

They forgot Nick Carter and the sentence of death.

They rushed headlong from the cabin to the deck just as the clock struck two. Even as they did so, the Witch plunged again, and then righted, but the water rushed in torrents into the cabin from the hold.

It was too late to save James Meredith. Nick knew that perfectly well. He believed that it was too late to save himself; but Nick Carter never lost his courage.

He knew that the men would seize the boats, and that he could not hope to embark with them.

With one mighty effort, he wrenched the cabin door from its hinges, and with it in his grasp, rushed out upon the deck.

The waves were dashing over the vessel already.

In a moment more he knew that she would go down.

Shrieks and cries were coming from the men who had seized the boats, for they were bottomless and useless.

Nick knew that he must escape then, if ever.

Gripping the door tightly, he plunged into the sea, hoping to escape the suction made by the sinking yacht.

Too late!

He had scarcely risen to the surface when the crisis came.

The Water Witch rose up on end, reaching her bow high out of water as if begging for mercy from the elements.

Then, with a loud groan, like the cry of a beast in pain, she went down stern foremost, while men and boats, wreckage, and Nick Carter still clinging tightly to the door, plunged into the vortex she created.

Nick knew the danger and prepared for it.

He filled his lungs with air and then held his breath, clinging with all his strength to the door.

Down, down, down! Nick's head seemed bursting. The impulse to open his mouth, to attempt to breathe, was almost uncontrollable.

Then when he thought that he could bear it no longer—just when he believed that he would never rise again, he shot up like a rocket, and still clinging to his door, floated, exhausted, but alive, upon the surface of the ocean.

He was utterly alone, with nothing but the door between him and death.

Suddenly, over the waters came the sound of a familiar voice—the voice of Lotus Benson.

"Man the topsail-halyards! Haul away! In with the fore-sheet! In with the main-sheet! Forward there! Up with the jib. Hard aport! Make fast all!"

Soon there was a rushing sound, and Nick dimly saw the Sea Scamp dash past him and disappear in the gloom.

Three days later a brig in the West India trade, which had been blown out of her course, was staggering along through a heavy sea.

She was in distress, for bedding and mattresses, hammocks and old sail, were stuffed into a large hole in her starboard bow.

The creaking of the pumps denoted that she was leaking badly, but nevertheless the watch in the top suddenly cried:

"Man afloat!"

"Where away?" asked the officer of the deck.

"Three points off the lee bow!"

The brig's course was changed, and she bore down upon Nick Carter and his door.

Nick was saved, although constant effort was required to keep the vessel from sinking.

The captain told Nick that on the preceding night he had collided with a schooner.

"Did you sink her?" asked Nick.

"Sink her! We cut her nearly in two parts. She went down before you could say Jack Robinson. Serve her right, too, for carrying no lights."

"Everybody lost?"

"We saved one man, but he is dying, and he cannot, or will not talk."

Nick was presently in the cabin where the rescued man was awaiting death.

He started greatly.

The face was that of Captain Jack, but whether Lotus or Mona was hidden in the disguise, he could not determine.

The captain returned to the deck, and Nick bent over the dying form.

"Is it Mona or Lotus?" he whispered.

She opened her eyes.

"You are Nick," she murmured. "I am Mona."

"And Lotus; did she perish?"

"I do not know. Probably—and yet——"

"What?"

"She believes that she would never die at sea. Perhaps she escaped."

"Perhaps; but you believe that she is dead?"

"Yes; I believe it. Nick, will you do me a favor?"

"Yes."

"I am dying. In an hour I will be dead. Sew all there is left of me in the hammock yourself. Tie the shot to my feet, and let no one know that I am Mona Meredith, or a woman. Will you promise?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

She never spoke again, and Nick kept his promises to her.

New York was reached in safety.

Those who were masquerading as Danforth Prim and as Gordon Cummings were arrested.

The body that had been buried for James Meredith was proven to be an unknown pauper, who had been taken from a hospital by Lotus and Mona, they having claimed relationship for the purpose.

The will was found, but no property.

But the Water Witch mystery was solved, because Nick Carter had been a sailor before the mast.

(THE END.)

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